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ABSTRACT

This study examined the importance of gender and gender role in understanding self-perceptions of body image. Male and female college students (N=166) who differed in gender role as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory completed the Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, a new measure of body image containing 140 items which fit a 3 x 3 matrix that fully crosses three somatic domains (physical appearance, physical fitness, and physical health) with three psychological dimensions (evaluation, importance, and behaviors). The results revealed that females placed more emphasis on physical appearance than did males, while the reverse was true for physical fitness. The importance of physical appearance to feminine females and the unimportance of physical fitness to feminine males were also evident from the results. Future research might examine actual physical and behavioral differences among the gender role groups and compare them to differences in self-perceptions. (Author/NB)

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GENDER, GENDER ROLE, AND BODY IMAGE

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Abstract

The importance of gender and gender role in understanding self perceptions of body image was examined in this research. Males and females who differed in gender role completed the Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (BSRQ; Winstead & Cash, 1984), a new measure of body image. As predicted, females placed more emphasis on physical appearance than males, while the reverse was true for physical fitness. The importance of physical appearance to feminine females and the unimportance of physical fitness to feminine males was also evident from the results. Implications for future research on gender role and body image are discussed.

The literature on person perception is replete with evidence of the central and organizing role of physical appearance in the evaluation others (cf. Mac Arthur, 1982). Recent research has identified a physical appearance component of gender stereotypes and a relation between physical appearance and gender traits in person perception (Deaux & Lewis, 1983; 1984). For example, tall, muscular persons are assumed to possess masculine personality traits. The focus of the present research was to examine the relation between physical appearance (i.e., body image) and gender traits (i.e., gender role) in self perception, and to consider sex differences in this relation.

Sex differences in concerns about physical appearance have been demonstrated in research on adolescent development (Frazier & Lisonbee, 1960; Jones & Mussen, 1958; Lerner & Korn, 1972). For example, Frazier and Lisonbee (1960) reported that males were more concerned about being too short whereas females were more concerned about being either too fat or too thin. Females expressed more concern about more aspects of their physical appearance than did males, consistent with the greater cultural emphasis on appearance for females than for males (e.g., Undry & Eckland, 1982).

In this research we examined sex differences on a number of body image dimensions. Previous research suggested the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Females will consider their physical appearance to be more important, and will direct more behaviors toward their physical

appearance than males.

Based on the research on gender stereotypes which has identified the "typical" male as more active, athletic, and interested in sports than the "typical" female (e.g., Deaux & Lewis, 1983), the second hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 2. Males will evaluate their physical fitness more favorably, will consider their physical fitness to be more important, and will direct more behaviors toward their physical fitness than females.

Recent research has also demonstrated a relation between gender role and body image. For example, Hawkins and his colleagues (Hawkins, Turell, & Jackson, 1983) found that dissatisfaction with weight-related physical appearance was negatively related to masculinity for both sexes. Research by Jackson and her colleagues (Jackson, Sullivan, & Hymes, in press) found that feminine females were more dissatisfied with their facial appearance than masculine females whereas the reverse was true about satisfaction with physique.

The hypothesis that the gender role groups will differ in their self ratings of body image is also suggested by gender schema theory (Bem, 1981a). According to this theory, gender serves as a more important organizing schema for sex-typed persons (i.e., masculine males and feminine females) than for non-sex-typed persons (i.e., androgynous and undifferentiated persons). In this research we predicted that the physical appearance ratings of sex-typed persons will be more influenced by cultural standards of desirable appearance

for the sexes than the ratings of non-sex-typed persons.

Hypothesis 3. Feminine females will consider their physical appearance to be more important, and will direct more behaviors toward their physical appearance than androgynous or undifferentiated females.

Hypothesis 4. Masculine males will evaluate their physical fitness more favorably, will consider physical fitness to be more important, and will direct more behaviors toward physical fitness than androgynous or undifferentiated males.

Methods

Subjects and Procedures.

Subjects were 166 undergraduates (60 males and 106 females) who participated in a study of Self Perceptions for extra course credit. They completed the experimental materials in mixed-sex groups of less than 16 persons supervised by a male or female experimenter.

Materials.

The Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (BSRQ; Noles et al., 1985; Winstead & Cash, 1984), Revision III, contains 140 items which fit a 3 X 3 matrix that fully crosses three Somatic Domains (Physical Appearance, Physical Fitness, and Physical Health) with three Psychological Dimensions (Evaluation, Importance, and Behaviors). -1 Five-point rating scales were used in which 1=definitely disagree and

5=definitely agree.

The short form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (s-BSRI; Bem, 1981b) was used to categorize subjects into the four gender role groups using the median split procedure (masculinity median=4.80, femininity median=5.38, 7-point rating scales).

Results

A 2(Gender; male or female) X 4(Gender Role; masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated) multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the subscale scores of the BSRQ. The multivariate effects were significant for Gender ($F(9,150)=8.35$, $p<.001$), Gender Role ($F(27,456)=3.43$, $p<.001$), and the Gender X Gender Role interaction ($F(27,456)=1.89$, $p<.01$). Means for the analysis are presented in Table 1.

In support of Hypothesis 1, females rated their physical appearance as more important ($F(1,158)=15.95$, $p<.001$), and directed more behaviors toward their physical appearance ($F(1,158)=39.34$, $p<>001$) than males. The sexes did not differ in evaluations of their physical appearance ($F(1,158)=0.72$, ns,), consistent with past research (e.g., Frazier & Lisonbee, 1960).

The sexes also differed in evaluations ($F(1,158)=6.98$, $p<.05$) and importance ($F(1,158)=6.85$, $p<.05$) of their physical fitness. In support of Hypothesis 2, males evaluated their physical fitness more

favorably, and considered physical fitness to be more important than females. However, males did not report engaging in more physical fitness behaviors than females, contrary to predictions ($F(1,158)=0.61$, ns.).

In partial support of Hypothesis 3, feminine females considered their physical appearance to be more important ($t(42)=2.95$, $p<.01$), and directed more behaviors toward their physical appearance ($t(42)=2.04$, $p<.05$) than undifferentiated females (Table 1). However, feminine females did not differ from androgynous females in these ratings, although they evaluated their physical appearance less favorably than androgynous females ($p<.05$).

There was no support for Hypothesis 4. Masculine males did not differ from androgynous or undifferentiated males in their ratings of evaluation, importance, and behaviors in the Physical Fitness Domain (Table 1). Rather, it was the feminine male whose self ratings were lowest for these dimensions, rating himself lower than the androgynous male for all three dimensions (Evaluation, $t(31)=3.86$, $p<.001$, Importance, $t(31)=2.15$, $p<.05$, Behaviors, $t(31)=3.39$, $p<.01$) and lower than the undifferentiated male on the importance of physical fitness ($t(21)=2.58$, $p<.05$).

Discussion

As predicted, females were more concerned about their physical appearance than males while the reverse was true of concerns about physical fitness. These findings suggest that the self ratings of the sexes mirror differences in cultural emphasis on appearance and fitness; appearance is more important for females in our culture and fitness, particularly as it reflects strength and athletic ability, is more important for males (Deaux & Lewis, 1983; Undry & Eckland, 1984).

Interestingly, the sexes did not differ in self reported fitness behaviors. It may be that the current popularity of fitness has resulted in an increase in fitness behaviors among females. Such an explanation does not rule out the possibility that the sexes are engaging in fitness behaviors for different reasons; to increase strength for males and to control weight for females. Future research is needed to address this question.

Our results also suggest the importance of gender role, particularly femininity, in understanding body image. Feminine females viewed their physical appearance as very important, but evaluated it less favorably than androgynous females. Feminine males were less interested and less involved in physical fitness than the other male groups. An important direction for future research is to examine actual physical and behavioral differences among the gender role groups and compare them to differences in self perceptions.

Footnotes

1 Results of the analysis for the Physical Health domain have been omitted in the interest of brevity. No predictions were made for this domain since none was suggested by previous research or theory.

Examples of the BSRQ items are:

Physical Appearance.

Evaluation - Members of the other sex think I am attractive.

Importance - I would do whatever it takes to look better.

Behaviors - I spend at least an hour a day dressing and grooming.

Physical Fitness.

Evaluation - I readily learn physical skills.

Importance - It is important that my body be in perfect working order.

Behaviors - I am involved in a regular program of exercise.

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	Males					Females				
	M	F	A	U	All Males	M	F	A	U	All Females
n =	14	10	23	13	60	16	25	46	19	106
Physical Appearance										
Evaluation (.90)	3.36	3.08	3.88	2.89	3.41	3.29	3.03	3.54	3.32	3.35
Importance (.88)	3.61	3.47	3.63	3.53	3.58	3.82	4.09	3.97	3.63	3.92
Behavior (.83)	3.08	3.07	3.18	2.91	3.08	3.63	3.60	3.76	3.25	3.61
Physical Fitness										
Evaluation (.88)	3.56	3.19	4.00	3.31	3.61	3.41	3.24	3.65	3.07	3.42
Importance (.83)	3.42	3.22	3.84	3.85	3.64	3.52	3.34	3.52	2.94	3.38
Behavior (.87)	3.25	2.71	3.77	3.18	3.35	3.60	3.12	3.43	2.63	3.24

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standardized coefficient alphas.

M = Masculine, F = Feminine, A = Androgynous, U = Undifferentiated.

Five-point rating scales were used where 1 = definitely disagree and 5 = definitely agree.

Table 1

Ratings on the subscales of the Body-Self Relations Questionnaire.

	Males					Females				
	M	F	A	U	All Males	M	F	A	U	All Females
n =	14	10	23	13	60	16	25	46	19	106
Physical Appearance										
Evaluation (.90)	3.36	3.08	3.88	2.89	3.41	3.29	3.03	3.54	3.32	3.35
Importance (.88)	3.61	3.47	3.63	3.53	3.58	3.82	4.09	3.97	3.63	3.92
Behavior (.83)	3.08	3.07	3.18	2.91	3.08	3.63	3.60	3.76	3.25	3.61
Physical Fitness										
Evaluation (.88)	3.56	3.19	4.00	3.31	3.61	3.41	3.24	3.65	3.07	3.42
Importance (.83)	3.42	3.22	3.84	3.85	3.64	3.52	3.34	3.52	2.94	3.38
Behavior (.87)	3.23	2.71	3.77	3.18	3.35	3.60	3.12	3.43	2.63	3.24

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standardized coefficient alphas.

M = Masculine, F = Feminine, A = Androgynous, U = Undifferentiated.

Five-point rating scales were used where 1 = definitely disagree and 5 = definitely agree.